

The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost
1 Sam. 17:32-49; Psalm 9:9-20; 2 Cor. 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

Calming the Waves*

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The calming of the storm – today's Gospel lesson – is a relatively rare theme in biblical art. There are lots and lots of annunciations, nativities, and crucifixions. But the calming of the storm – not so much.

In fact, one of the best-known works on this theme, a painting by Rembrandt, was stolen from the Gardner Museum in Boston in 1990. It's still missing, 25 years later.

So it's a good practice to see an artistic rendering of the calming of the storm whenever you can!

Recently, I had the good fortune of seeing such a work myself. Last month, I was at St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, Italy. I had read about a wonderful 12th century mosaic of the calming of the storm in the basilica, and so I was determined to see it for myself.

Finding the mosaic, however, was actually a lot harder than I thought. If you've ever been to St. Mark's Basilica, you know that just about every square inch of the basilica's enormous ceiling, arches, and columns is covered in gold mosaics – enough to cover one and a half football fields.

Because there is no map of where each mosaic is located, I ended up spending two extended visits to the basilica over the course of two days before I found the mosaic. I felt like I was in a Dan Brown mystery novel.

I eventually did find the mosaic. And just in the nick of time, because my beloved spouse Michael was starting to get a little annoyed that we were spending all this time in Venice looking for a single piece of religious art. Don't worry though – I paid him back with plenty of gelato.

Anyway, the search for the mosaic was worth it. Three things jumped out at me as I finally gazed upon the image.

First, the giant waves. Right next to the boat with Jesus and the apostles, there is a huge, oversized wall of water that is several times the height of the boat. The waves are literally about to overwhelm the apostles, both physically and emotionally.

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Second, the apostles' gaze. The apostles are terrified, and they are looking all over the place: at each other, at the giant waves, and even at us, the viewers. But other than St. Peter, none of the apostles is actually looking at Jesus.

Third, the centrality of Jesus. Jesus actually appears twice in the mosaic, much like a time-lapse photograph. On the right side of the boat, Jesus is sleeping peacefully on a pillow. On the left side, Jesus is standing up, and his hand is raised to bless the elements.

For me, these three aspects of the mosaic – the giant waves, the apostles' gaze, and the centrality of Jesus – are helpful guideposts in reflecting upon today's gospel lesson, and its relevance to our lives.

First, the giant waves. Often, we encounter giant waves in our lives that threaten to overwhelm us. The waves might consist of actual physical dangers, such as a natural disaster. Or the waves might represent other kinds of threats to our well-being, such as the loss of a job, the onset of a serious health issue, or the death of a loved one.

One wave that many of us have experienced over the last few days is the grief and rage following Wednesday night's horrific shooting of nine African Americans at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

This senseless act of domestic terrorism – which occurred, by the way, in the middle of the victims' Bible study on the Gospel of Mark – was just the latest in a long string of attacks and hate crimes against Black churches and, more broadly, the African American community. For me, this attack called to mind the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Church in Birmingham, Alabama, as well as attacks that have occurred for generations before that.

In today's epistle reading from his second letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul describes the many waves that he experienced in his own ministry: afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger.

Today's gospel lesson is realistic about the waves in our lives. These waves do exist, and they can be terrifying.

Second, the apostles' gaze. It's really easy to let the giant waves in our lives overwhelm us. That is, it's easy to stare at the waves and to be paralyzed by our fears. Indeed, the apostles see nothing but their own danger. "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?," they ask Jesus.

The apostles' fearful gaze can be contrasted with another famous gaze in biblical art – Michelangelo's statue of David in Florence. That statue captures a key moment from today's Hebrew Bible reading: the moment immediately before David vanquishes Goliath with his slingshot. How do we know this? Well, if you look at the David statue

from the *side* – and not just from the front – you can see him holding a stone in his right hand, which he is just about to throw at Goliath.

For me, Goliath symbolizes the overwhelming evils of racism, white supremacy, poverty, and other structural oppressions that threaten to destroy the reign of God in our midst.

Even though we are told in First Samuel that David is “only a youth,” that he is too small to wear any armor, and that he is far outsize by Goliath, the young shepherd’s gaze – as depicted in Michelangelo’s statue – is calm, and he is not overwhelmed by the task before him. It’s not surprising that the comforting opening words of today’s psalm are attributed to David: “The Lord will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in time of trouble.”

Third, the centrality of Jesus. Like the apostles in today’s gospel lesson, we sometimes have a tendency to forget about Jesus when we need him the most. Now I’m not talking about using Jesus as some kind of superstitious talisman to ward off all danger.

Rather, I mean remembering that Jesus is literally “God with us” – that is, “Emmanuel” in the Hebrew – as evidenced by the incarnation and the resurrection. To answer the apostles’ question: Yes, Jesus *does* care if we are perishing. We are never alone with our waves.

As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said at the funeral of the young girls who were killed in the 16th Street Church bombing: “[Life] has its bleak and difficult moments. . . . its moments of drought and its moments of flood. . . . And if one will hold on, he will discover that God walks with him. . . . You do not walk alone.”

Perhaps we might find some comfort in Dr. King’s words, 52 years later, as we seek justice for the Charleston Nine, and as we pray for their families and loved ones, especially on this Father’s Day.

On this Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, I invite you to reflect on the waves in your life:

- How large are the waves, and when can they be overwhelming?
- Where is your gaze directed? At the waves? At others? At Christ?
- And how might you awaken the sleeping Christ within your hearts to calm the waves, whether for yourself or for others?

May we always have faith in the Christ who journeys with us across the sea of life.